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ABSTRACT

Many advocates of collaborative writing place too little emphasis on the emotional benefits of feedback to the writer by restricting group feedback to relatively late points in the writing process. Collaboration is as appropriate during the early stages of writing as it is after the completion of a draft. Students can receive feedback from sympathetic allies while they are generating ideas, while they are jotting down notes about possible theses, while they are running up against dead ends in research, and while they are developing a rhetorical stance. This broadening of the range of problems upon which collaborative writing works is important because it helps reduce students' isolation, gives them moral support, and provides them with wider or different points of view throughout the writing process, from prewriting through final editing. In short, teachers should apply collaborative writing strategies to finding a promising topic, generating details on the topic, and locating the intended audience for a paper. (RL)

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Teamwork and Feedback:

Broadening the Base of Collaborative Writing

By

Richard Gebhardt

Collaborative writing rests on several interconnected theoretical underpinnings, all of which can be seen in this quotation from James Moffett's "Learning to Write by Writing":

Ideally, a student would write because he was intent on saying something for real reasons of his own and because he wanted to get certain effects on a definite audience. . . . A maximum amount of feedback would be provided him in the form of audience response. That is, his writing would be read and discussed by his audience, who would also be the coaches. This response would be candid and specific. Adjustments in language, form, and content would come as the writer's response to his audience's response. . . . A student responds and comments to a peer more in his own terms, whereas the teacher is more likely to focus too soon on technique. A student, moreover, may write off the comments of a teacher by saying to himself, "Adults just can't understand," or "English teachers are nit-pickers anyway," but when his fellow human beings misread him, he has to accommodate the feedback. By habitually responding and coaching, students get insights about their own writing.¹

These theoretical underpinnings are the rhetorical sense of audience; the psychological power of peer influence; the transfer-of-learning principle by which commenting on the work of others helps students gain insights into their own writing; and the principle of feedback through which students sense how well their writing is communicating.

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Feedback, in fact, almost can be considered the theoretical base of collaborative writing because it is what allows all of the other principles to work. A sense of audience is impossible unless a writer has had experience with how audiences have responded to different approaches in the past--and such experience is feedback. Peer pressure is nothing without feedback that indicates whether peers approve or disapprove. And transference of skill from reading others' writing to viewing one's own work critically depends on the kind of feedback a student receives when he or she offers comments during collaborative workshops.

Considering the central place of feedback in collaborative writing, I have been surprised by the narrowness of the concept of feedback in most discussions of collaboration. Specifically, it seems to me that too little consideration is given to the emotional isolation against which feedback operates, and that the feedback possibilities of collaboration generally are not applied to the whole range of the writing process.

To begin with, advocates of collaborative writing place too little emphasis on the emotional benefits of feedback to the writer. Please do not misunderstand me; the emotional is not denied. Kenneth Bruffee mentions the "support" collaboration provides students in his article, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models." ² In Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing, Thom Hawkins also speaks of the general support of collaboration, as well as a sort of dialectal support in which "peers are very accepting toward and appreciative of the rich variety of dialects and accents" ³ And Carol M. Jacko writes that, in collaboration, students "tend to develop a commitment to each other, are comfortable with having other students read and comment on their papers, and show signs of seeing themselves as resources." ⁴

Having expressed such sentiments, however, teachers advocating collaborative writing usually turn from the arena of emotions and toward the intellectual

material and the skills students can learn from group feedback. For instance, Jacko's comments on the commitment and comfort students feel within groups is a minor point in an article presenting a structured approach "to improvement of writing skills . . . utilizing the dynamics of small-group processes"(290). Bruffee writes in one paragraph of the support that groups provide while students undergo the painful process of achieving new awarenesses of language. But in the next paragraph, he turns to cognitive matters and writes about how group members "become increasingly capable of detecting lack of clarity, organization, logic, and substance" (640-641). And James Moffett emphasizes very similar kinds of information--"irrelevance, unnecessary repetition, confusing organization, omitted leads and transitions, anticlimactic endings" (195)--in his discussion of group feedback. Even more than the type of information that Moffett says that student groups impart is the tone he ascribes to such groups while they are providing the information: "multiple responses to a piece of writing make feedback more impersonal and easier to heed. Group reactions establish a consensus about some objective aspects of the writing" (194).

Clearly, nothing is wrong with the idea that collaboration gives students information about techniques of writing. The problem is that a great deal of what a writer needs when he or she is struggling to write is less cognitive than such information. To see what I mean, consider this statement William Saroyan made in Saturday Review some years ago:

While [the writer] works he is alone. If the work is difficult . . . , he feels alone, and sometimes even abandoned. But the real question is: how much loneliness can you know. But the word itself isn't especially accurate, in any case: that which is named loneliness is probably more nearly ineffectiveness, a form of failure, a form of fear

When the going is good a writer knows very little, if any loneliness. When it is bad he believes he knows nothing else. The flaw is the same in either event: when the writer thought the going was good and therefore felt no loneliness, the writing was not necessarily good, and when he

believed the going was bad and therefore felt ineffective, the writing may actually have been good. He just happened to feel loneliness at the time. If it wasn't something he ate, it was surely something that was eating him. ⁵

Notice here that the artistic or technical problem of isolation is all mixed up with emotional feelings of loneliness and frustration. "If the work is difficult," Saroyan says, the writer feels alone and abandoned, though the feeling of loneliness really is "ineffectiveness, a form of failure, a form of fear." And Saroyan then goes on to explain the problem that this "loneliness" poses for the writer: any judgments of "good" or "bad" that writers may make on their work reflect more of the emotional state--whether the writing seems to be going well or not--rather than anything like objective quality in the work. And if a seasoned professional writer experiences writing this way, it is not hard to imagine how crippling the mixture of frustration, loneliness, lack of confidence, and fear of failing can be for students--especially those with limited experience with printed words, those who have had few opportunities to write, those who have received plenty of humiliation at the hands of English teachers.

It is at this tangle of technical and emotional matters, I think, that the feedback of a collaborative writing group should aim. Since students feel fear and frustration privately, they need to be helped to see that they are not alone, that they can receive feedback from others who themselves are fearful and frustrated and so themselves need help. They need to feel, when they open up in a writing group, that others understand their hesitancy and look at their writing with sympathetic candor. Such positive vibrations returning in response to the attempt to be open in a collaborative group are forms of feedback, just as much as is the information that may flow back about confusing organization.

Very little attention, however, usually is given to this dimension of

feedback. There is a great deal of room, I think, for writing teachers to explore more candidly the emotional flow in collaborative writing groups--perhaps by finding ways to blend group process instruction into writing classes or by finding ways to use values-clarification and sensitivity-building exercises in writing groups. Perhaps most important, though, writing teachers need to find ways to let groups provide support during the parts of the writing process in which students usually remain painfully alone, even in classes that use collaborative writing strategies.

In suggesting, here, that group work can be extended into parts of the writing process to which it is not often applied, I am turning to the second limitation I have noticed with the way feedback is discussed in connection with collaborative writing. This is, simply, the restriction of group feedback to relatively late points in the writing process. As we all know, the process of writing is a complex thing. A writer must locate a subject, generate details, find a personal attitude toward the subject, define an intended audience, select appropriate organizing strategies, and revise for greater clarity, appropriateness to attitude, and impact on the audience. By and large, though, collaborative writing strategies have tended to emphasize the final phases of composition.

For example, in an article called, "What Students Can Do to Take the Burden Off You," Francine Hardaway writes that in "the prewriting session, students divide into groups to try out theses, help each other with outlines, and read opening paragraphs to one another." ⁶ But that is about all she says ^{about prewriting} in a four-page article emphasizing peer evaluation, and even the things she mentions--theses, outlines, opening paragraphs of papers--really are not products of the earliest stages of writing. Like Hardaway, some teachers call less for collaborative learning than for collaborative evaluation. For instance, the March 1975 English Journal contains two consecutive pieces on

collaboration: "How to Avoid Grading Compositions" and "Peer Evaluation and Peer Grading." More frequently, teachers are interested in collaborative editing. Thus Donald Murray writes in A Writer Teaches Writing that each student comes to a "writing small group" to expose "his own writing--which he has written as well as he can--to other individuals in the group so they can help him make it a better piece of writing." ⁷ Notice, here, that students are to write their way to a pretty late draft before they come to the group for assistance. Similarly, in Writing Without Teachers, Peter Elbow details a very practical way for students to privately write-write-write toward a paper, and later, in a separate chapter, he describes how a group can go about responding to the drafts that its members bring with them.

Now I am in complete agreement with the idea of broadening the student writer's sense of audience, of giving students practice in critical reading of papers, and of letting students learn from the editing suggestions of their peers. But considering the frustration and fear that often accompany writing, it seems a shame to limit collaboration only to the end of the writing process--to leave writers on their own while they generate material, crystalize a thesis, develop a sense of audience and voice, and organize a draft, and only then give them the benefit of other minds.

Peter Elbow, in his chapter, "The Process of Writing--Cooking," writes:

If you are stuck writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to. . . .

Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one head usually can. It's why brain-storming works. I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then I see something new on the basis of your restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said. ⁸

This passage may seem to illustrate the importance of early collaboration. But Elbow really is not talking about brain-storming--in which people start

at or near zero and talk their way toward an idea--so much as responding to a written draft. This fact is quite clear in words that I deleted from the middle of the previous quotation:

I write a paper; it's not very good; I discuss it with someone; after fifteen minutes of back-and-forth I say something in response to a question or argument of his and he says, "But why didn't you say that? That's good. That's clear." I want to shout, "But I did say that. The whole paper is saying that." But in truth the whole paper is nearly implying or leading up to or circumnavigating that. Until I could see my words and thoughts refracted through his consciousness, I couldn't say it directly that way. (p. 49)

Similarly, James Moffett speaks of using peer teaching "during the writing process, before the final draft," by which he means taking earlier drafts and having a group "exchange papers . . . , read them, write comments on them, and discuss them" (p. 197). And Carol Jacko describes a "triad process" in which students:

bring to class copies of a first-draft paper, form groups of three, and exchange papers. They are given the task of taking these papers home, reading them, and writing comments on them, using guidelines which the teacher provides. When they return to the next class meeting, students join the original group of three and share perceptions about each other's papers in order to receive information which would be useful to them in producing a final paper. (p. 290)

What I am suggesting is something different from--or rather something in addition to--this collaborative editing. It seems to me that collaborative writing strategies should be applied to finding a promising topic, generating details on the topic, and locating the intended audience for a paper.

To locate promising topics, a group of students could list a large number of topics that seem appropriate for the course and the specific assignment. After each member selects a tentative topic from the list, the group could discuss the chosen topics to help writers sense how interesting the potential topics seem and to suggest sources of information on the topics. Still later,

after individuals have modified their topics in light of group response, the group could discuss whether each topic is limited enough to be completed in a paper of the assigned length and broad enough not to turn into an exercise in trivia.

To generate details on a promising topic, students could work, as a team, to do the sort of brain-storming or rapid listing of details that texts and teachers so often recommend for individual writers. The group could begin with an assignment as if it were going to write one common paper. The members could fill up a chalk-board with as many facts, anecdotes, questions, and other information as they could; and they could interact, throwing out ideas triggered by earlier comments of others.

Or a group could use, in adapted form, techniques of free writing. Using Writing Without Teachers, for example, students could modify Peter Elbow's system of forty-five minutes of writing followed by fifteen minutes of reading and reflecting so that students would share free writings with their group and get the benefit of several sets of eyes to discover the "centers of gravity," before free writing again to discover more details.

Once students have developed lists of details or rapid, free writing drafts, they could use group work to help clarify the focus on subjects. Texts and teachers often tell individual writers to look over a brain-stormed list to see developing patterns of ideas and details. But five sets of eyes and five brains can locate more patterns, sub-points, potential theses, and interesting editorial slants than can one writer. Similarly, the popular advice to ask and answer questions about a subject--advice stemming, for instance, from Kenneth Burke's Pentad or Richard Larson's method of "Discovery Through Questioning"⁹--can be modified so that five people pose the questions and suggest clarifying answers, once individuals have even a fuzzy sense of what it is they hope to write.

Group work also can help a student develop a clearer sense of audience and of likely audience-response to a projected paper, even before that paper has moved beyond hasty free writings and informal notes taken during group discussion. For example, a group could discuss a projected paper, reported orally or represented in a very early draft, by providing their honest reactions. Group members could discuss how much or how little they know about the subject and how they react emotionally to the topic. Since any group of four or five probably will have quite a range of knowledge, attitudes, and assumptions on a given subject, such a discussion can provide a writer with a cross-section of possible audience diversity.

On the other hand, group members could play Devil's advocates, deliberately presenting critical reactions that somebody, somewhere might hold. Each group member could pretend to be a petty, critical sniper so that each writer, in turn, could begin to gauge how his or her paper might need to be modified for an unsympathetic audience.

Or the group could decide what the most likely audience for a given paper is and then devise some plausible situation in which members of that audience could talk about the paper--possibly English teachers discussing student work during a coffee break, to simulate a teacher audience. Then, being as animated and imaginative as possible, the group could role-play what it thinks would happen if members of the audience had a chance to discuss the paper.

The little sampler of strategies I have just given suggests, I hope, that collaboration is as appropriate during the early stages of writing as it is after the completion of a draft. Students can receive feedback from sympathetic allies while they are generating ideas, while they are jotting down notes about possible theses, while they are running up against dead ends in research, while they are trying to make sense out of their texts'

instructions about discovering a topic, developing a rhetorical stance, supporting generalizations, and so on. This broadening of the range of problems upon which collaborative writing works is important, since it can help de-isolate students and give them moral support, as well as wider points of view, throughout the writing process. And this, it seems to me, is a more productive approach to use with inexperienced and unconfident writers than to say, "Write a pretty complete draft, and then five students will tell you what they think of your work."

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Notes

¹Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 193-195, emphasis added. To facilitate oral presentation of the paper, copies of this quotation will be distributed to the audience.

²College English, 34 (Feb. 1973), 640.

³(Urbana: NCTE and ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1976), pp. 7-8.

⁴"Small-Group Triad: An Instructional Mode for the Teaching of Writing," College Composition and Communication, 29 (Oct. 1978), 292.

⁵"Why Does a Writer Write?" Saturday Review, 25 Feb. 1961; rpt. Writer to Writer, ed. Floyd Watkins and Karl Knight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 30. To facilitate oral presentation of the paper, copies of this quotation will be distributed to the audience.

⁶College English, 36 (Jan. 1975), 579.

⁷(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 132.

⁸(New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 49-50.

⁹College English, 30 (Nov. 1968), 126-34.